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# Creating and Contesting Latter-day Saint Pilgrimage to Nauvoo, Illinois

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Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (frequently referred to as Latter-day Saints or Mormons) share with other faiths a desire to celebrate sites significant to their founding. By memorialising religious sacred space, the Church of Jesus Christ has created a desire among many of its more than sixteen million members to retrace the steps of their early faith leaders as pilgrims. As with other religious sites around the world, Latter-day Saint pilgrimage destinations have also become scenes of contestation. Churches that divided from the original movement offer rival interpretations of the its history and beliefs, leading at times to division and discord. Additionally, many of the sites central to the church's founding are small towns today, magnifying the impact of tens of thousands of seasonal pilgrims on rural communities whose residents often do not share in the story nor want their towns to be transformed by religious tourists. Latter-day Saint pilgrimage has reshaped the identity of these communities as rival faiths and local residents vie over interpretation.

Chief among Latter-day Saint early pilgrimage sites is Nauvoo, Illinois, the faith's headquarters in the 1840s, burial site of its founder, Joseph Smith, and most visited early historic site. Throughout the twentieth century, the church purchased approximately half of the town, restoring and rebuilding it into a Latter-day Saint version of America's Colonial Williamsburg. Visitors enter homes, shops, and public buildings, learning from costumed representatives of the church about religious life in a nineteenth-century-themed religious community. Meanwhile, local residents grapple with the influx of thousands of pilgrims and the challenges created by a pilgrimage destination not of their making. This paper serves as a case-study in shared sacred space, exploring the contestation and cooperation that go into the creating of a pilgrimage destination.

**Key Words:** Mormonism, contestation, conflict, religious tourism, pilgrimage

## Introduction & Context

Religious tourism is 'perhaps the oldest and most prevalent type of travel in human history' (Kaelber, 2006:49). In the modern era, 'pilgrimage has become so widespread that it is one of the most pervasive forms of human mobility in the world today' (Nyaupane, Timothy, and Poudel, 2015:343). Ancient and extensive though it may be, religiously-motivated travel nevertheless appears to be on the rise even more as pilgrimage merges with other forms of tourism (Olsen and Timothy, 2006). Educational, cultural, artistic, and social motivations draw visitors to many of the same sacred sites that attract religious travellers (Abbate and Di Nuovo, 2013; Raj, 2012; Marine-Roig, 2015). As a result, cultural travel and mass tourism have increased commodification at religious sites, introducing what some call elements of McDonaldization and Disneyfication into religious space (Olsen and Timothy, 2003; Ritzer, 2002; Bryman, 2004; Kaelber, 2006). This creates competition and sometimes conflict as religiously-

motivated seekers, secular tourists, and local residents compete for resources, control, and meaning (Digance, 2003).

Like pilgrimage itself, competition for sacred space may also be ancient, as it is likely local parishioners at popular sites even in the medieval ages were impacted by throngs of religious tourists (Digance, 2003). Today 'conflicts over sacred space are a pervasive and global phenomenon' (Hassner, 2003:4). Disputes simple or significant emerge because of the indivisibility of spaces that:

*involve religious ideals, divine presence [and] absolute and transcendent values ... [leaving] ... no room for compromise and no substitute for the disputed space* (Hassner, 2003:24).

While conflicts may erupt, and thus are most felt at the local level, they are at times exacerbated due to

*elite struggles over the possessions of places ... which tend to engage political actors far from the site of the conflicts rather than local communities* (Bowman, 2011:371).

Local communities, therefore, sometimes become pawns in the contestation of sacred space, reaping revenue on one hand, but bearing the burden of overcrowding and the loss of a self-selected identity on the other (Olsen and Timothy, 2003). While some studies exist regarding conflict at single events or selected sites, additional examples as well as theoretical work might be pursued in this important area (Hassner, 2003).

Across the last two centuries, one faith familiar with religious conflict, historic site development, and dramatic growth is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the less than two hundred years since its formation in 1830, the movement has grown from six founding members in the United States to more than sixteen million members worldwide. Such rapid growth has led to comparisons with other religions, most notably the prediction of sociologist of religion Rodney Stark (1984:19) that the church stands 'on the threshold of becoming the first major faith to appear on earth since the Prophet Mohammed rode out of the desert.' While pilgrimage is not a formal tenet of the Church of Jesus Christ as it is for some religions, the sites sacred to the faith's founding attract thousands of visitors in a form of self-selected, informal pilgrimage (Olsen, 2006b, 255). Because of the throngs of visitors that descend on what are often otherwise small rural towns, Latter-day Saint sacred spaces are sometimes scenes of interpretive confrontation. Rival faiths and local residents vie over the meaning of the locations they share.

Most prominent among these sites is Nauvoo, Illinois, the former home for the Church of Jesus Christ in the 1840s and final resting place of its founder, Joseph Smith. In the 1840s, Nauvoo, Illinois, was a religious boomtown. Rivaling Chicago, Illinois, in size at the time, it was the headquarters for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (frequently referred to as the Latter-day Saints or Mormons), a controversial American frontier religion whose theology and social practices attracted controversy. Following several violent episodes in the church's first two decades of existence, Joseph Smith, the religion's prophet-leader, was killed in 1844 and thousands of Latter-day Saints relocated two thousand kilometres west to the territory of Utah in the western United States.

During the twentieth century, the church transformed into a global faith, emerging from their enclave in the American West to form strong congregations across Europe, Latin America, Asia, the Pacific, and Africa. In conjunction with their emergence from isolation, they returned to their former headquarters in Nauvoo, Illinois, in a dramatic way. Acquiring nearly half of the property in the city, the faith transformed the rural town of approximately one thousand residents into a historical recreation of its earlier nineteenth century splendour. This included restoring the surviving homes of the faith's early leaders, reconstructing business and community structures to model nineteenth century life, and rebuilding a replica of the famed Nauvoo Temple, a building an arsonist had torched more than a century earlier. Patterned after the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg and employing some of its chief visionaries, Latter-day Saint leaders pitched their project as a 'Williamsburg of the Midwest' (Maffitt, 1969:3). They sought to capture the nation's interest in its past while inserting their faith into the larger American, and eventually international religious narrative. As a result, thousands of visitors annually walk the restored shops and homes, listening to the faith's missionaries, dressed in period clothing, tell the story of 1840s religious life in the city. Many enter the Nauvoo Temple, recreating the religious rites performed by their predecessors generations before.

However, the Latter-day Saint return to the city of Nauvoo in the twentieth century has also created conflict. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (also known as Community of Christ), a sister-faith founded by descendants of Joseph Smith in 1860, has long operated the most significant religious properties in the community, including the residences and store of Smith as well as the cemetery where he and other members of his family are interred. In doing so, they control significant pilgrimage areas in the city, forwarding a rival interpretation of Nauvoo's earlier days. Visitors to these sites hear differing perspectives over theology and religious practice from the messages delivered in the adjacent Latter-day Saint-controlled areas. Additionally, community members without a connection to either branch of the Church of Jesus Christ seek to preserve their own rich history rooted in the French communalists, German farmers, and Catholic boarding-school educators who shaped the city after the Latter-day Saints fled (Blum, 1969). As they do so, some also lament the loss of rural midwestern life they once enjoyed.

This study examines the conflicts over historical memory that have developed as Latter-day Saints returned to Nauvoo, Illinois, in the twentieth century. Using the city as a case study in contested sacred space, it explores the competition between site developers, rival faiths, and long-time residents that has shaped this shrine. Finally, it investigates the contestation and cooperation that go into the creation of a pilgrimage destination.

### Return of Latter-day Saints to Nauvoo

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Latter-day Saints have long maintained an interest in their former home of Nauvoo, Illinois. Driven to relocate their headquarters in Salt Lake City, thousands of kilometres away, their theological and emotional roots remained grounded in the soil of the American Midwest. From their mountain retreat, leaders longingly looked back on Nauvoo, predicting to their followers a day when the

*possessions, of which you have been fraudulently despoiled in ... Illinois, you will again possess, and that without force, or fraud or violence* (Taylor, 1883:61-62).

Fulfilling the promise, the church and some of its members acquired historically significant properties across the region throughout the first six decades of the twentieth century. The process began in 1903 with the acquisition of the Carthage Jail, a property located nearly forty kilometres away and important for the faith because it is the site of the martyrdom of its founder, Joseph Smith. The development of a pilgrimage destination continued with additional purchases and property restorations aimed at

*awakening a public interest in, and an understanding and appreciation of, the story of Nauvoo and the mass migration of its people to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake in the area which has now become the State of Utah* (Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., n.d.).

Restoring and reconstructing dozens of 1840s era homes, businesses, and meeting spaces, the project transformed the city into a pilgrimage destination for the faith's worldwide membership as well as a tourist stop for those interested in pioneer life and American expansion.

In developing Nauvoo, Illinois, as a site to examine westward expansion, the faith sought to capitalise on the country's Cold War thirst for American exceptionalism (Rugh, 2008) as well as its 'selective

presentation of the past' (Bodnar, 1992:177). A counterculture revolution, coupled with perceived foreign policy failures abroad, divided the nation. Responding to a 'national identity gone awry, or bordering on ruin, or in need of revision,' Latter-day Saints portrayed themselves and their story as the embodiment of a glorious American past (Doss, 2010:57).

In its initial stages, the project drew the national attention it sought. United States National Park Service directors Conrad Wirth and George Hartzog, visionaries and archaeologists from Colonial Williamsburg, business luminaries like hotel founder J. Willard Marriott, and United States Presidential cabinet members George Romney and David Kennedy all participated in one way or another during the early decades of site development. The high-profile cast demonstrated Latter-day Saint desire to capitalise on religious pilgrimage to forward its message (Olsen, 2006b) while connecting with the national discourse celebrating America's founding. As the nation's bicentennial approached in 1976, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints found a way to fit a restored Nauvoo and the pilgrimage it generated into a grand American narrative.

### Reacting to the Return

The rebranding of Latter-day Saint Nauvoo as a pilgrimage site was not without controversy. Local residents, some of whom descended from the same nineteenth century founders of the city, embraced a different view of the faith's past. Others whose families occupied the city following the Latter-day Saint exodus of 1846 had called Nauvoo home for generations, significantly longer than the seven brief years it served as headquarters for the Church of Jesus Christ. Lacking a lineal connection to Nauvoo's Latter-day Saint past, they expressed little desire to recreate it.

Prominently, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, founded in 1860 by Joseph Smith's son Joseph Smith III, developed a different vision for commemorating the religious story within the city. Initially, this consisted of simply occupying his residences and moving on with their lives following Joseph Smith's death. Emma Smith, the widow of the church founder and mother to the head of its Reorganization, remarried and raised her family in the city. In the years that followed, her children and grandchildren recognised interest in their family's faith



story and developed the surviving properties into tourist sites for their growing movement.

Gradually, these locations were transformed from mere places of interest into pilgrimage destinations. In 1928, the Reorganized Church sought to first locate, then memorialise the secret grave of Joseph Smith himself, capitalising on the longing among his followers to pay respect to their founder (Bernauer, 2001). At the same time, the faith employed guides charged with correcting misperceptions and disseminating their message at the Smith residences.

*We have had many visitors here this summer, coming from all parts of the country ... [one member summarized in 1920] ... They desire to know what we teach and the main difference between us and the Utah Church. We also have many visitors from the Utah people and we treat them kindly, and hope someday they will see the error of their ways and return to the true church (Burton, 1920:795).*

The return, first of visitors from the western church, and later the rival faith itself through its expansive building restoration program, was met with resistance. During the mid-twentieth century, a pilgrimage war emerged across Nauvoo, with each church seeking to convey their versions of the history of the city. In early years of the Latter-day Saint return to Nauvoo, the aim of some Reorganized Church guides was ‘to spoil some Mormons’ vacation,’ a practice that may have been reciprocated at other sites around the town (Stobaugh, 1992:38). Later, the Reorganized Church unsuccessfully attempted to block key purchases of historic properties by their larger and better-funded western relative. Finally, they countered with a rival restoration initiative, complete with a modern visitor centre and their own remodelled and reconstructed buildings. These reactions demonstrated the competition that often emerges when religious traditions divide to become rivals.

*By staking claim to a sacred site that once united the religious movement ... [Ron Hassner (2003:16) notes] ... each rival asserts its claim as inheritor of the true faith.’*

Unable to keep up with the neighbouring multi-million-dollar restoration project conducted by the Latter-day Saints, Reorganized Church officials eventually abandoned the competition, reconciling themselves to a minority position within what had become a pilgrimage city. Church Apostle Reed Holmes summarised the intent,

*We have come to understand ... that these historic sites must not be considered as an opportunity to have a captive audience—as an opportunity to simply do our thing in apologetics for our faith, nor to consider them primarily [as] evangelistic tools. Rather, we have come to feel that it is absolutely imperative that we provide there an authentic, genuine experience of the times, the people, and the values represented (Stobaugh, 1992:39).*

As their respective developments in restored Nauvoo matured, the Latter-day Saint and Reorganized Latter Day Saint faiths opted to cooperate rather than compete for Nauvoo’s pilgrims. Effort at goodwill and outreach emerged, characterised by joint commemorations, the sharing of resources, and softened messages. One brochure from the era captures the change,

*Historic Nauvoo celebrates the accomplishments of the Latter-day Saints in establishing ‘Nauvoo, the beautiful,’ a place of prosperity, sacrifice, and religious refuge. It also speaks of the harmony and peace in which today’s Latter-day Saints live with their neighbors (Nauvoo Restoration, Incorporated, 1991).*

### Local Residents Feeling Left Out

While amicable feelings have slowly developed between the branches that share the same religious root, the same cannot be said for all of the local residents of Nauvoo unaffiliated with Latter-day saint traditions. Among these groups, their city often feels like a stage where an 1840s story is reenacted but where they are not permitted to perform. The stories they could tell include those of a French Utopian society who found a footing in the soil of western Illinois, a century-old Catholic Benedictine school that became home to thousands of students, and German immigrants who carved out a living in the rural American Midwest. From the perspective of the local residents, these stories have been deemed less important, ignored because they don’t connect to 1840s Latter-day Saint history. As a result, while the restoration of one version of Nauvoo has been beneficial to some industries, including its few hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops, Nauvoo’s dependence on Latter-day Saint pilgrimage has also divided residents.

As the numbers of pilgrims visiting Nauvoo increased, residents felt left out of their city’s resurgence. In 1970, the *St Louis Post-Dispatch* (‘Rebuilding at

Nauvoo,' 6) questioned, 'Could the community keep its identity in the wake of the saintly steam roller?' A *New York Times* article covering Nauvoo's resurgence reported:

*There is ample evidence that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is gaining momentum in its effort to turn Nauvoo into what church leaders call 'the Williamsburg of the West.' The non-Mormon merchants and civic leaders of Nauvoo watch all this with a mixture of approval at the thought of economic gains from visitors to the restoration and some apprehension that the Mormon plans, still not specifically outlined, will direct this potential bonanza into church-owned enterprises rather than local establishment.*

The article added:

*Older residents have bridled at ... announcements by the Utah Mormons that the church's return to Nauvoo would rejuvenate a slumbering river village (King, 1970:55).*

Skepticism turned to regret for some across town as restored Latter-day Saint Nauvoo continued to expand. 'I would say the majority of the population of Nauvoo wished that this never happened,' summarised one local resident:

*They'd just as soon not have the Mormon influx and keep the town the way it was. It's changing their town. They lived here because they liked this quiet little community, and also it's a natural thing to have a fear of the unknown. Here's this large influx come in, and they're afraid of it (Moffitt, 2003:184).*

A second revealed:

*The city is split right now. There's a handful of people that are against any kind of growth. Those are the ones you hear: the loudest ones. They're not really anti-Mormon as much as they don't want to change their way of life. It could be the largest Jewish group you've ever seen, and move into Nauvoo and take over and build some massive synagogue, and have two hundred thousand Jews coming in here, and that would bother them. It's just the impact of the people. It's not as much the Mormon Church as it is the change of life (McCarty, 2003:156).*

These reactions demonstrate the differing views that can envelope a pilgrimage destination.

*In the collective Mormon consciousness, the clocks in Nauvoo stopped ticking when the wagons started rolling West ... [concluded one*

*observer] ... For Mormons, Nauvoo is not a bustling little town. It is a sacred place frozen in time (Egan, 2000:8).*

For local residents, however, Nauvoo is home. 'It's our town, as far as we're concerned,' commented former Mayor Dale Bruegger. 'And as far as the Mormons are concerned, it's their town' (Egan, 2000:8). The two perspectives, Nauvoo as home to approximately one thousand residents and Nauvoo as pilgrimage destination for tens of thousands of visitors annually exist in perpetual tension. In this, Nauvoo shares in the blessing and burden that pervades other pilgrimage destinations. It is one example among many of how

*various stakeholders have different interests in the way religious sites are conserved, managed, and consumed by tourists (Olsen, 2006a:111).*

Pilgrimage can attract economic prosperity to a community, but also unwelcome change (Graave, Klijs, and Heijman, 2017). In Nauvoo, Illinois, an anticipated economic boom following the reconstruction of the famed Latter-day Saint temple failed to materialise. Though more than 300,000 visitors descended on the town during a seven-week open house period in 2002, the hundreds of thousands of visitors that local businessmen and entreprenuring investors envisioned continually flocking to the city have failed to do so. While pilgrims still come to Nauvoo, especially during the busy summer travel season, they rarely stay longer than a day or two, possibly deterred by the limited lodging and dining establishments in the town. Businessmen have experienced first-hand what Markus Hilpert (2018, 84) concluded. 'Religious tourists spend considerably less at small places of pilgrimage than the touristic average'.

Following an economic downturn in 2008, foundations for hotel expansions that could have solved the lodging dilemma sit incomplete and businesses across town are shuttered. Establishments struggle to profit in the seasonal pilgrimage economy. Family homes have been replaced by vacation rentals, leading to school consolidations because of the lack of school-age children. Residents confront the harsh reality of relying on tourism as their primary economic driver. Ironically, a religiously-themed site like Nauvoo is a witness that pilgrimage can be a 'devil's bargain' (Rothman, 1998).

## Conclusion

The restoration of Nauvoo is a story of contestation caused by pilgrimage. It exemplifies the conclusion of historian Hal Rothman (1998:11), 'The embrace of tourism triggers a contest for the soul of a place.' In Nauvoo, this contest for the town's soul has embroiled the different branches of the Church of Jesus Christ as well as the local residents who sit on the sideline, watching their city be transformed.

The tension created by the Latter-day Saint return reveals the cost of pilgrimage upon a host community. The restoration of Nauvoo initially drove a wedge between religious traditions, as the western and midwestern branches of the Church of Jesus Christ conducted rival building programs and competing

guide services. The story demonstrates how pilgrimage can divide even those who share a common religious founding. Control of contested sacred space allows for control of the experience and its messaging. This is especially significant for faiths like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints whose theology includes a strong focus on evangelising.

Among those in Nauvoo unaffiliated with either faith, pilgrimage has also transformed their home. In religious tourism destinations like Nauvoo, local residents pay a price for the popularity their communities enjoy. A town's identity and quality of life are transformed with the advent of religious tourism. Tour buses clog rural roads, city councils grapple with noise and crowd ordinances, and real estate is transformed from residences to rentals. These are some of the costs of contested pilgrimage.

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